Strengthening Peacekeeping, 1961–64

Hammarskjöld’s death in 1961, the Congo quagmire and the UN’s concomitant financial crisis placed the Organization’s efforts to improve the conceptual and practical foundations of peacekeeping in cold storage. U Thant did not display his predecessor’s drive to strengthen the intellectual underpinning of the UN’s work, and the deaths of 250 peacekeepers and international staff in the Congo constituted a profoundly chastening experience for the Secretariat.

However, in Britain, while events in the Congo certainly made life more difficult for proponents of peacekeeping, there remained a residual faith in the value of UN operations. Even during ONUC’s bloodiest period in December 1961, when the Government vacillated over supplying bombs to the United Nations, the Labour Opposition still felt able to accuse it of failing to give the Organization the tools to do the job. Moreover, as had happened in the aftermath of the Suez crisis, officials in the Foreign Office and elsewhere in Whitehall soon resumed pondering how to fix peacekeeping.

This chapter examines the ongoing development of thinking on peacekeeping among British policy-makers at this time, and the surprisingly measured conclusions they drew from the UN’s woes in the Congo. This process can be viewed as a continuation of policy-makers’ first real consideration, in 1957, of peacekeeping as an integral function of the United Nations. The chapter looks at the practical contributions of civil servants, often made with little, if any, Ministerial input. It also studies the impact of the personal interest in peacekeeping of senior British military figures. The account thereby highlights the fact that policy does not always result from Cabinet debates and Ministerial decisions but can emerge out of the actions of lower-level players acting on the belief that a practice is worthwhile.

British efforts to strengthen peacekeeping did not occur in isolation and must be viewed in the light of other aspects of the country’s foreign affairs at the time, including its position in the changing political climate inside
and outside the United Nations. The turbulent relations between the super-powers and their allies not only produced the 1961 Berlin crisis, the 1962 Cuban missile crisis and, more positively, the 1963 Partial Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty, but also contributed to the growing sense of identity of the non-aligned movement. Hammarskjöld and U Thant encouraged the latter’s belief that smaller countries could play a distinctive role in the United Nations and that their views on peacekeeping and other issues should not be ignored by more powerful players, including Britain. Of equal importance for understanding Britain’s position on UN peacekeeping in this period are the several military interventions which it conducted outside a UN framework. In particular, the 1961 intervention in Kuwait highlighted the fact that strengthening peacekeeping did not necessarily entail supporting a role for the United Nations in every crisis.

The account ends before the launch, in March 1964, of the UN operation in Cyprus (UNFICYP), which is treated in the next chapter.

British views on standing international forces

In April 1961, Edward Hale of the Foreign Office’s UN Department took stock of efforts to create a force ‘permanently available, on immediate call’ by the United Nations.\footnote{Strengthening Peacekeeping, 1961–64} By this, he apparently meant a standing force, and he sought to distinguish it from ‘a force permanently at the disposal of the United Nations, on the model of [UNEF]’, which signified a standby force. Even this rather opaque distinction was abandoned in the analysis, and Hale followed the Foreign Office’s habit of using the term ‘permanent force’ to refer to both varieties.

Hale concluded that little had changed since the canvassing of other Whitehall departments and Commonwealth countries in 1957. He assumed that the General Assembly would retain the right to launch UN operations and observed that the expansion of the UN’s membership entailed a risk of increased pressure on Britain and other colonial powers to accept a force in a dependent territory. He considered that unless recent positive remarks by US officials on peacekeeping yielded ‘any startling proposals’, the best approach would be to maintain the current line of supporting a ‘permanent’ force in principle, while pointing out the practical difficulties.

Hale’s conclusion reflected the Foreign Office’s current focus on UN peacekeeping at the structural or ‘macro’ level. This included the legislative authority for creating operations (namely, whether they should be authorized exclusively by the Security Council or whether the General Assembly could continue to play a role) and the relative permanence of a force (that is, standing, standby or completely ad hoc). However, ONUC’s performance at this time showed that there were also many micro-level measures which could be taken to strengthen the management and quality of peacekeeping,